



*This is the typewritten copy of my
earlier letter. Kind regards.
Ch. F.*

Biokemiska Institutionen, Uppsala

AUG 10 1964

AT/mr
Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Stanford University
Medical Center
Department of Genetics
Palo Alto, California
USA

Dear Dr. Lederberg:

I wish to thank you for your letter of June 24th and particularly for taking me into your confidence in some questions which have also been on my mind for some years. My delay in answering is thus not to be interpreted as a lack of interest, but is rather due to travel and vacation and to a certain extent also to the lack of a secretary in this area.

For this reason you will also have to try to decipher my handwriting.

Of course I agree with you that the points at issue should best be dealt with by direct personal contact. I hope this can be arranged in the near future, and that our correspondence can be regarded as a prelude to a closer interchange of views, possibly also to a materialization of ideas into certain actions.

I do not think you need to worry about the incident you refer to in the beginning of your letter. Although I do not know the details (and have no wish to do so) I can roughly guess what kind of experience you have had. Such things happen now and then to most laureates and we in the Foundation are sympathetic and understanding and do not react unless there is a widely publicized and gross misuse of the Nobel name (as in the remarkable "Annual Nobel Dinner" case in New York).

As regards your "trial of conscience" in 1958 I have the impression (from personal comments by several fellow laureates) that similar reactions are not uncommon. In my own words of thanks at the Nobel banquet in 1948 I made a point of the fact that scientific discoveries can not be regarded as personal achievements as for example art, music and literature.

TIS EL 105 / A.

"If Columbus had not discovered America somebody else would have done it sooner or later, simply because America has been there all the time."

To my great surprise I have found that this viewpoint is not at all selfevident to people in general, not even to some (very devoted) wives of Nobel laureates. Moreover, of course, the increasing tendency to team-work ^{it} contributes still more to obscure the personal contribution. Against this background ^{it} may appear surprising that the Nobel prizes (and perhaps also other scientific distinctions) rather appear to attract increasing attention and appreciation. This is certainly true as far as the general public is concerned, but perhaps also in scientific and cultural society. Although I thus understand and respect your reasons I am glad that your hesitation did not ~~lead~~ you to refuse to accept the prize. And these are my reasons:

First of all you will realize that the Nobel committees are well aware of the impossibility of judging which candidate is the best, simply because "the best" can not be defined. This is of course most obvious for the awards in literature (and peace) but it applies also to the scientific prizes. What we try is to find worthy candidates, and doing our best in this, we hope that the world will understand and forgive that practically every prize decision may be said to involve some neglect or even injustice. You may now ask: why carry on this almost impossible task? ^(formally) This leads to my second point. I regard it as our duty not only to try to fulfill the intentions as expressed in Alfred Nobels will: I think that the prizes do contribute to attract the attention of the general public, including governments, parliaments and others who believe that they determine the destiny of our world, to emphasize particularly the value of fundamental work in science, medicine and literature. (I suppose the peace prize needs no special comments). I believe that this is more important to-day than ever before. I think you will agree that the demand for results of immediate usefulness always will threaten the position of basic scientific research. You may have observed that the Nobel committees take a long-range view when judging what is to be considered as a benefit to mankind.

Now, suppose you agree, you still might like to ask: why should certain people (the laureates) have to be victims of these otherwise laudible efforts to help mankind? As an answer I would like to quote one of my good friends, professor Cruz-Coke of Chile (who, by the way, almost became president of that republic, but somehow managed to escape undamaged to his laboratory).

We were once discussing the value of distinctions (honorary degrees, robes, academy memberships, medals etc.) at a boulevard café in Paris, when he suddenly stood up and exclaimed: "I have my prestige to spend it."

In applying this kind of philosophy, however, one certainly runs the kind of risks which you have in mind when you speak of certain eminent colleagues being tempted to express opinions in fields where their wisdom is very limited. This should absolutely not obscure the fact that the authoritative opinion of Nobel laureates (as individuals or as a group) may carry an enormous weight in the world to-day.

This leads me to your last point. Naturally we have often asked ourselves if not the Nobel Foundation could do more "in the service of mankind" - in the spirit of Alfred Nobel's will - from the platform of prestige, respect and general good will his Foundation appears to enjoy to-day. Such efforts would not seem to offer great problems as long as one deals with strictly scientific, literary etc. questions, belonging to the Nobel prize fields in a narrow sense. Certain plans are now being worked out to expand the Foundation's activities beyond the prize-awarding functions (e.g. conferences, Nobel guest lectures etc.) and you will hear more about this in due time. However, what you have in mind is obviously something more. I myself have speculated along somewhat different lines but with similar aims. I believe these questions should be further discussed and various possibilities explored. There is one point which must be kept in mind, however. The Nobel Foundation has always been most anxious that the acceptance of a Nobel prize should not involve any kind of obligation from the recipients part. The laureates are individuals and should not be asked to act as a group (unless they wish to do so by themselves). The Foundation has therefore been very cautious (perhaps over-cautious?) in avoiding public engagements or manifestations outside its own field. I myself sometimes feel as if we are guarding an elderly, very distinguished lady against "cavaliers" who would wish to court her.

Certainly you do not belong to that kind and I hope that you will maintain your interest in these questions and that we shall have a chance of carrying on this interesting discussion.

You referred to my address at the Pnyx last month. I enclose a copy and I shall send you some reprints of speeches and lectures dealing with some aspects of the problems which concern us both.

With cordial regards,

Arne Tiselius